

CLICK HERE for Multiple Property Listing, "Black
Metropolis Thematic Resources"

M.R.A. _____
H/D (IF APP) _____
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OTHER _____

PROPERTY NAME OVERTON HYGIENIC BUILDING

LOCATION 3619-27 S. State Street CITY/TOWN/VICINITY Chicago

COUNTY Cook STATE Illinois ZIP 60653

OWNER'S NAME Exchange Natl. Bank under Trust Agreement #18307

LOCATION 120 S. LaSalle Street CITY/TOWN/VICINITY Chicago

STATE Illinois ZIP 60603

LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION Cook County Recorder of Deeds

118 N. Clark Street

Chicago, Illinois

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION LOTS 47,48,49,50,51, BLK. A IN FREEMAN'S ADDITION TO

CHICAGO, BEING THE N. 20 ACRES OF THE W $\frac{1}{2}$ SW $\frac{1}{2}$ SEC.

34-39-14

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE Less than one acre

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION 1922-23 ARCHITECT AND/OR BUILDER Z. Erol Smith, Architect

DESCRIPTION Four-story concrete-frame building clad in yellow-brown wire-cut

face brick and glazed white terra cotta. Allowances were made for

the addition of additional stories, as evidenced by the extension

of the elevator and mechanical shaft two stories above the roof

level.

DATE AND NATURE OF ALTERATIONS Storefront alterations executed ca. 1960, including

the bricking-up of the three southern storefronts.

The original openings, however, are still intact.

OUTBUILDINGS AND/OR OTHER CULTURAL RESOURCES ON PROPERTY (ATTACH SKETCH
PLAN IF APPLICABLE) N/A

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National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places
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OVERTON HYGIENIC/DOUGLASS NATIONAL BANK BUILDING
3619-27 South State Street

Date of construction: 1922-23

Architect: Z. Erol Smith

In announcing the groundbreaking for the Overton Hygienic/Douglass National Bank Building, an editorial published in *The Half Century Magazine* stated:

Commercially speaking, the ground breaking for the new home of the Douglass National Bank, which took place in Chicago in November, marked another stride in racial history. This new building is being erected at a cost of a quarter of a million dollars, and when completed will be the finest structure of its kind owned by Colored people.

But just as it is impossible to value a home in dollars and cents, so is it impossible to place a monetary value on this very interesting building project—for its value to the race is immeasurable.

Promoted during construction as a "monument to Negro thrift and industry," the Overton Hygienic Building was also in effect a tribute to the diverse business genius of its principal backer, Anthony Overton. Starting with a small cosmetics firm which he built into a major industry through his unrelenting standards of quality and business integrity, Overton eventually expanded his interests to a wide variety of enterprises that were of great importance to the development of Black Metropolis. Among the diverse enterprises founded by Overton in response to the needs of the growing black community were the Overton Hygienic Company, a pioneering firm in black cosmetics; the Victory Life Insurance Company; the *Chicago Bee*, a major black newspaper; *The Half Century Magazine*, a black-oriented monthly magazine; and the Douglass National Bank, the first black bank to be granted a national charter. The construction of the Overton Hygienic Building in 1922-23 not only provided quarters for Overton's diverse financial empire, but also provided the first new rental office space to be made available to black professionals, making the building the prime business address of Black Metropolis.

Overton was born into slavery on March 21, 1865, at Monroe, Louisiana. He was educated at Washburn College and at the University of Kansas where he received a Bachelor of Laws degree in 1888 and later served as Judge of the Municipal Court in Shawnee County, Kansas. After a brief venture as proprietor of a general store in Oklahoma, Overton moved to Kansas City where in 1898 he established one of the pioneering firms to specialize in the black cosmetics market, the Overton Hygienic Company. In need of expanded facilities, Overton moved the company to Chicago in 1911 where he set up his residence and factory in a former apartment building at 5200 South Wabash Avenue. Through creative marketing techniques such as comprehensive advertising programs and home agent solicitation of Overton Hygienic products, the firm rapidly became one of the foremost producers of black cosmetics, with sales distribution extending as far as Egypt,

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Liberia, and Japan. Overton Hygienic products were always marked by quality and high ethical standards, as evidenced by Overton's steadfast refusal to manufacture degrading products such as skin bleachers which were prominently advertised in black press of the time. Individual products manufactured by Overton Hygienic numbered over one hundred and included face powder, perfumes, shoe polish, hair preparations, baking powder, toilet water, and flavoring extracts.

Building on public confidence in the Overton Hygienic Company, Overton launched *The Half Century Magazine* in 1916, marking the beginning of what was to become an extensive publishing enterprise. *The Half Century Magazine* was a variety magazine aimed at the black audience, and it included black fiction, news reports, homemaking features, and essays on the problems of succeeding in black business ventures. Not afraid to introduce healthy competition in the black marketplace, Overton established the newspaper the *Chicago Bee* in 1926 to take on Robert S. Abbott's popular *Chicago Defender*. Similarly, Overton sought to break into the fledgling black insurance market through his establishment of the Victory Life Insurance Company.

One of Overton's proudest achievements was the establishment of the Douglass National Bank in 1922. From the beginnings of Black Metropolis at the turn of the century, banks were either white-owned and -operated concerns within the black community, or were small privately-owned banks or building and loan associations which, although financed by black capital, were free from the protective safeguards of state or national charters. The need for a black-owned bank under the protection of state or national supervision was strongly expressed in the January, 1919 issue of Overton's *The Half Century Magazine*:

The most deplorable condition of all is that many of our people individually as well as churches, societies and other organizations have large funds on deposit in white banks in which not only the said banking institutions would refuse to give any of our people employment or make them loans, but what is worse, these same Negro funds are loaned to white business institutions, that likewise would not give employment to any of our race in any capacity. The Negro's money is used to close the door of opportunity in his own face.

Two years later, Jesse Binga's private bank became the first black-owned bank to be reorganized and operated under state charter, followed by the establishment in 1922 of Overton's rival Douglass National Bank. Both institutions successfully operated in healthy competition until both were destroyed by the Great Depression in the early 1930s.

By 1922, Overton's diverse business interests had outgrown his Wabash Avenue headquarters, with his varied companies scattered in isolated buildings throughout the South Side. To consolidate his interests, Overton announced plans in 1922 to erect the Overton Hygienic Building, a projected six-story structure which would centrally house his varied manufacturing, publishing, and business enterprises, as well as providing modern office space for rental to professionals. Like the earlier Jordan Building, Overton sought to finance the building through the selling of bonds, and he placed prominent advertisements in his *The Half Century Magazine* encouraging the black community to financially

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participate in the project. The advertisements prominently featured illustrations of the architect's rendering of the building captioned "A Monument to Negro Industry and Thrift," followed by text which explained:

We have money with which to finance three stories of this building, but we want to erect six stories and make it a credit to the race in every particular. Accordingly, we have issued First Mortgage Gold Bonds to the extent of \$200,000.00.

The bond campaign was apparently not a full success as the building was eventually erected as a four-story structure rather than the six stories that Overton had hoped for. Nevertheless, the Overton Hygienic Building was an imposing structure within Black Metropolis and firmly established the magnitude of the Overton interests with the black community.

The Overton Hygienic Building is similar in appearance to the earlier Jordan Building with street facades of yellow-brown wire-cut brick and white terra-cotta trim, but it is considerably more substantial in size and materials of construction. The Overton was supported by a complete reinforced concrete frame, with every effort having been made to make the building as fireproof as possible. The building was designed by Z. Erol Smith, a South Side white architect who had considerable experience in the design of commercial buildings throughout the city.

The quarters for the Douglass National Bank and Victory Life Insurance Company occupied the majority of the ground floor, emphasized at night by a series of bare light bulbs which studded the terra-cotta string course above the storefronts. Interiors of the bank were finished with white marble applied to walls, counters, and lower parts of the concrete structural columns, and vault and safe deposit facilities were included. The second floor was arranged for rental offices which were the finest business facilities in Black Metropolis. Tenants included the Theater Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) which managed and booked black stage acts; Chicago's first black architect, Walter T. Bailey, who in 1926 designed the eight-story Pythian Temple at State Street and 37th Place; and Overton's son-in-law, Dr. Julian H. Lewis, professor of pathology at the University of Chicago. Other tenants included a variety of physicians, lawyers, music publishers, and various business enterprises. The third floor was occupied by the Overton businesses while the fourth floor was planned for the manufacturing facilities of the Overton Hygienic Company.

The Overton interests continued to prosper and grow in the building throughout the twenties, and for his significant business achievements Anthony Overton was honored with two awards for his advancement of black business, the Springarn Medal in 1927 and the Harmon Business Award in 1928.

Initially, Overton's carefully managed business ventures weathered the Great Depression fairly well, but three major runs on the Douglass National Bank in 1932 due to public hysteria over bank closings resulted in its failure and the near insolvency of the closely allied Victory Life Insurance Company. While he was able to retain control of the Overton Hygienic Company and the *Chicago Bee*, the financial depletions resulting from the loss

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of the bank and the general financial hardships of the Depression greatly hampered the growth of Overton's business enterprises, and forced the eventual abandonment of the Overton Hygienic Building for more consolidated quarters in the Chicago Bee Building one block south. Overton retained control of the Overton Hygienic Company until his death in 1946, and the business still is in operation today.

The successes and failures of Overton's career were best described in an obituary published in the *Journal of Negro History* for July, 1947:

His life offers many lessons in avoiding pitfalls and at the same time offers an example of painstaking effort and perseverance through trials to a measure of success. While his life shows that some achievements are not possible under some circumstances, it demonstrates at the same time what is possible to the man of energy and enterprise. Overton's life as a whole is a part of that chapter in American history which records the rise of a pioneer from humble walks of life to usefulness and influence. He will long be remembered among the first of those Negro business men who endeavored to lead the way onward for the quarter of a million Negroes in Chicago.

The Overton Hygienic Building is now vacant except for the ground-floor stores.

VIRGINIA, Rockbridge County, Mechanicsville vicinity, Locust Hill, VA 608 (05/12/86)

WASHINGTON, Clark County, Vancouver, Anderson--Beletski Prune Farm, 4119 NW McCann Rd.
(05/15/86)

WASHINGTON, Cowlitz County, Castle Rock vicinity, Laughlin Round Barn, 8249 Barnes Dr.
(05/15/86)

WASHINGTON, Lewis County, Chehalis, Palmer, O. K., House, 673 NW Pennsylvania (05/15/86)

WASHINGTON, Snohomish County, Everett, Weyerhaeuser Office Building, 1710 W. Marine View Dr.
(05/14/86)

WASHINGTON, Whitman County, Oakesdale vicinity, Hanford, Edwin H., House, N of WA 271
(05/15/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Barbour County, Philippi, Philippi B & O Railroad Station, 146 N. Main St. (05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Beallmore (Pleasant Avenue MRA), 1500 Pleasant Ave.
(05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Brooke Cemetery (Pleasant Avenue MRA), 2200 Pleasant
Ave. (05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Duval, General I.H., Mansion (Pleasant Avenue MRA),
1222 Pleasant Ave. (05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Elmhurst (Pleasant Avenue MRA), 1606 Pleasant Ave.
(05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Hall, Lewis, Mansion (Pleasant Avenue MRA), 1300
Pleasant Ave. (05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Paul, Harry and Louisiana Beall, Mansion (Pleasant
Avenue MRA), 1312 Pleasant Ave. (05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Tarr, Lucy, Mansion (Pleasant Avenue MRA), 1456
Pleasant Ave. (05/16/86)

WEST VIRGINIA, Brooke County, Wellsburg, Fleming, David and Lucy Tarr, Mansion (Pleasant Avenue
MRA), 2000 Pleasant Ave. (05/16/86)

WYOMING, Carbon County, Saratoga vicinity, Jack Creek Guard Station, Off FDR No. 452 (05/15/86)

The following properties were also entered in the National Register but were excluded from a previous
notice:

ILLINOIS, Cook County, Chicago, Chicago Bee Building (Black Metropolis TR), 3647--3655 S. State St.
(04/30/86)

ILLINOIS, Cook County, Chicago, Eighth Regiment Armory (Black Metropolis TR), 3533 S. Giles Ave.
(04/30/86)

ILLINOIS, Cook County, Chicago, Jordon Building (Black Metropolis TR), 3529--3549 S. State St.
(04/30/86)

ILLINOIS, Cook County, Chicago, Overton Hygienic Building (Black Metropolis TR), 3619--3627 S.
State St. (04/30/86)

ILLINOIS, Cook County, Chicago, Unity Hall (Black Metropolis TR), 3140 S. Indiana Ave. (04/30/86)

ILLINOIS, Cook County, Chicago, Victory Sculpture (Black Metropolis TR), Thirty-fifth St. at King Dr.
(04/30/86)

ILLINOIS, Cook County, Chicago, Wabash Avenue YMCA (Black Metropolis TR), 3763 S. Wabash Ave.
(04/30/86)